

2

Taking Care of Charlie

See this one? The brown one like a star. I call it Charlie's medal. I tried to look after him but he just wasn't meant to make it home I suppose.

We were repelling up this valley. At least we thought we were repelling. The Vietcong sucked us right in. You almost had to admire them. We thought we had them running but we should have known they were backing up too easy.

And Charlie's ahead a little. With all the noise he couldn't hear us yelling at him to slow up. Too late - he's walked into the middle of a land mine. He's realised it himself. The mines are pretty poorly done and you can see them quite clearly, but Charlie's just frozen. I mean, in Vietnam, even the home made mines can bounce up and blow your head off, so you're better off not stepping on them, you know?

So we're all calling to him, to Charlie, pointing the way out of the mines, "through here", "there's one to the left", "step to your right", and bloody Charlie just crosses his legs and sits down! Worst thing you can do.

And it's then we realise the VC have stopped shooting at us. We can still see them. A head here and there through the trees on the other side of Charlie's clearing.

But they just stopped to watch what we're going to do. Laughing and pointing - it's all a bloody game to them.

Well, I can see Charlie's foot marks pretty clear, and the mines too, and I'm the only corporal in the patrol. So I put down my rifle and pack.

"Hang on Charlie. I'll come and hold ya hand." I step lightly into Charlie's footprints. "Come on Charlie. Stand up and start walking back to me in your own footprints."

"Can't. Me legs won't work."

I've taken about seven or eight strides real careful, heel-toe in each scuff mark.

"At least meet me half way, ya lazy bugger," I say to him. You got to be careful calling out - it can make you lose your balance.

"Can't move."

He's really gone this time, I think. "You have to move, Charlie, or a sniper's going to pick you off."

No answer. I stop to check on the little yellow bums. They could have finished us no effort, but they're still standing around laughing at us. Just laughing and pointing and jabbering in that bloody jabber they go on with. Harris gets his lolly up and I see him shoulder his weapon.

"Don't shoot ya bloody moron," I shout. "They'll start shooting back and Charlie and me are in the crossfire."

I'm almost at him, Charlie, you know, and I can hear him going off like a poker machine pay out. "Oh Jesus! Lord! God! God! God! Hare Krishna, rama, rama, rama. Oh Buddha, Buddha, Allah," he's babbling. "Oh Jesus save me. Oh God. God. Satan. Mummy."

"What are you on about, Charles?" I'm right next to him now. "You're going to be right as long as you just shut up." I mumble under my breath, "If you don't, I'll probably kill you myself."

Charlie's just staring at my footsteps. "You got any cigarettes?"

Taking Care of Charlie

For a moment I actually check my pocket. Reflex action, but reflex can get you killed out here.

"We'll have one together when we get out of here. Now Charlie, you gotta stand up. Then I can piggy-back you outa here. Is that ok?"

I grab his arm, he grabs mine and he starts to stand up. I turn around slowly and I can feel his arms tighten around my throat as he pulls himself closer. I gag a little but he climbs aboard and I get my balance. He stinks, you know. Not just from the sweat of the heat and the chase of the patrol. It's true - you can smell fear. But only on someone else apparently.

"Remember when we played piggy-back in second class, Charlie? And at footy training. When was that Charlie? When did we play football together?"

"Don't know."

"Was it first year or second year? Old Johnny Gorman was the coach. You remember Johnny Gorman, Charlie?"

Facing into the sun now, Charlie's footprints are harder to see for some reason.

"What've you stopped for?" Charlie asks.

"It's your turn to carry me," I say. The boys can see the worry on my face.

"To the left. To the left," they're calling.

"My left, or yours?"

"Is that a footprint or a bomb?"

"Could be either."

"You want to figure it out, one way or the other. Charlie's getting heavy."

"Step on it and then we'll all know."

I thought of the perfect answer about ten years later, but right then a VC bullet just about parts my hair. Charlie's smell gets suddenly worse, and there's no decision to make.

To this day I'm still deaf from Charlie yelling in my ear. But the click of the bomb under my foot was louder. It was just a homemade mine but it had enough to scar

me up to the inside thigh. Charlie to his credit dragged me the last ten yards.

Anyway, the army doctor's needlework wasn't too flash and you really don't want to see the scar, but that's what the medal's for - bloody Charlie.

I mean, I promised to look after him, but I didn't know how hard he was going to make it for me. I wonder sometimes if he did it deliberately - set up these weird things just to keep me honest, you know?

Like, he was always having animal trouble.

There was this one time, we're just moving from one dug-in to the next, a long line of us, single file like ants and it has to be Charlie who has the boa constrictor fall out of the tree on him. I mean the boa wasn't hungry or anything, it had just fallen asleep in the tree and slowly unravelled from the branch, then gravity takes over, you know and suddenly Charlie's wearing a twenty foot snake!

You've never seen two living creatures trying so hard to get away from each other, getting so tangled up with each other. Bit like half the relationships in the world, I suppose. At least Charlie didn't have to marry the boa.

Though plenty have - that's bravery you don't get a medal for.

Even in war your greatest acts of bravery go unrewarded. Unnoticed except by yourself. I suppose that's reward enough.

Like that time in Lai Dong. It was supposed to be an easy days' stroll - we weren't even in the combat zone. Just packing up communications gear to move to the next observation post. That's what they were called but really they were just eight foot deep holes in the ground with a ladder and a place to set up radio equipment. I just picked up a base plate for the mortar tube and I actually heard the first bullet zing past my helmet and bounce off the base plate. It went straight through Aby's neck. Straight through his 'Star of David' pendant. To this day I wonder if that means something. Suppose you

Taking Care of Charlie

shouldn't think like that, but you can't help wondering, can you?

Blood's spurting out of Aby's throat even before he's hit the ground and the corman's run over to him and he's nearly picked off, and it's too bloody obvious that we're sitting ducks and these VC are hard core.

So Charlie and me, we just dive back in the comm. post dug-in and we're chucking rifles and helmets up to the top and no-one's had time to reassemble the mortar tube.

And we're trying to get on the radio at the same time, not that you can hear over the noise, and people are screaming and mates are dying or at least being wounded. Charlie's screaming into the radio and just getting static, you know, and I run back up the ladder and right in front of me I see Noel about to take a VC blade right in the balls and I pop one off right into that yellow bastard's eyes. Half his head blew off but he just kept staring at me as he fell, even after he fell.

And I see mates with half their arm missing, dragging mates with half their chest missing, and they're trying to get back to the dug-in and a couple of them have made it and a corman's trying to sort out his medical box, Charlie screaming on the radio, buddies screaming in pain or mouth open with nothing coming out like they're in shock, you know, and I swear I hear a baby crying.

So I look up out of the dug-in again and it's one of the VC lying on his back and it looks like he's been hit by a rocket or something, he's almost totally dismantled, but he's making this real primitive sound. And I see his mate crawling over to him and he sees me and he waves at me to look away or to go away or something and I can't believe it, he takes out his pistol and shoots his own guy through the head. And the baby stops crying.

Then the other VC guy, he looks at me again and then crawls back into the trees.

I count our heads against their firing positions and we're outnumbered about three to one but our guys are holding their place, some of them losing a ton of blood, so I jump back down to get some bandages from the corman and I hear Charlie just scream, "You what?" down the radio. Just static. Charlie is totally manic by now, "Australian High Command - please repeat. Over."

Then loud and clear, even I heard it. "Sorry buddy. You guys got yourself into this so get yourselves out of it. We don't work on Sundays."

"They're gunna fucking leave us here," Charlie's just about turned white. "They won't come and get us out because it's Sunday!"

"You sure?"

"They said it about four times - 'We don't work on Sunday.'"

"Get onto his superior, Charlie!"

"That was the superior. Some bloody desk-jockey Colonel."

"Useless piece of ..."

Then a yankie accent on the radio. "What's your position?"

A nearby bloody yankie chopper has somehow intercepted the call. Charlie snatches the radio mike up. "We're in Lai Dong comm. post 5."

"You're breaking up. We don't have your comm. posts on our maps."

"Just follow the noise, Sam."

Well those bloody yanks do a sweep over the whole Lai Dong Valley just to find us and you could hear the rotors over the gun fire, so I ran back up the ladder and there's no joke, bloody six of them choppers, fully stacked - guns, napalm, marines, the lot. That's yanks for you - they're bloody heroes when they outnumber you fifteen to one.

But they drop a full company of marines behind us, then four of the six choppers take off and honest to God, I have never seen that much napalm in one place. You

Taking Care of Charlie

could see the VC running in every direction but I swear not one of them got away. Sam hit them with bloody rockets and machine gun fire and grenades and tube launched napalm after napalm and some of the stench drifted over to us. Typical septic overkill, but they didn't need to come and get us, I suppose.

And they were so bloody fast to airvac the wounded.

So it's just about over, but there must be one yellow bum left, and I don't see him, but I see what he did. He lobbs this hand grenade right into the comm. post. And Charlie just looks at me, total terror, you know, and I don't know how I thought of it, but I grabbed a helmet and shoved it over the grenade then stood on the helmet, and just waited, like I know I'm going to get my legs blown off, but it might save some inside the comm. post or something, I don't know what I'm thinking really.

And I wait. And Charlie's staring. And he waits.

Nothing happens. The bloody thing's a fizzer!

And my sergeant turns around carrying a stretcher and sees me standing on a helmet in the middle of the comm. post and he says, "What are you doing dickhead? Do you want to get out of this shit or do you want to just fart around?"

Then I realise that Charlie and me are the only ones to have seen the grenade come in.

So they clear out the wounded and the other four choppers come back and we get all the gear up, squeeze it onto the choppers with the marines.

I go with one of Sam's back to the comm. post for one last sweep and he says, "Hey, you wanna grab that helmet off the floor?"

I smile and say, "Nup. Leave it where it is."

And no-one except Charlie and me know about why I left me helmet.

So we're sitting together at the door of the chopper as it wobbles off the ground and we start to bank away from the ambush site, when there's this sharp blue-

green-yellow flash from the dug-in and my helmet comes flying out, about thirty feet in the air.

And I look at Charlie, who's laughing. I look at the marine next to him, who's reading his pocket Bible.

Then Charlie grabs his radio and yells into it, "Patrol to Lai Dong Australian High Command. Request that Colonel Desk-jockey takes his 'we don't work on Sundays' and shove it up your arse. Over."

Never found out if the Colonel got the message.

Didn't matter much. About a week later Charlie got eaten by a tiger. I mean, we didn't even know there were bloody tigers in the jungle. No-one told us.

But Charlie just goes out one night for a smoke or a piss or something and this tiger leaps out on him and bites his head off. Poor bugger. But that was Charlie. He was always having animal trouble.